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ABSTRACT

The concluding chapter of Tom Quirk's new book, "Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn," raises the question: "Is 'Huckleberry Finn' politically correct?" Quirk's book identifies acutely some of the fundamental issues regarding how racial attitudes and ideological agendas shape the way this great novel is read and taught. Critics have complained that interpreting Huck Finn as antiracist is reductive and ignores countervailing tendencies in the text. For Quirk this implies making Twain into a 1990s politically correct liberal, which he was not; and for Wayne Booth, author of the critical study called "The Company We Keep", it represents the even worse sin of dismissing the moral complexities of the novel in favor of self-satisfied rationalizing. Some critics have argued that the post-Reconstruction era was so violently racist that no more than a handful of Southerners wrote antiracist novels. In that sense, "Huckleberry Finn" is certainly not politically correct: the political correctness of Twain's era was, after all, strident racism. Only a superficial reading of black characters in "Huck Finn" as reflections of racial stereotypes can ignore how Twain undercuts such stereotypes and exposes their inadequacy. The conformity that goes along with political correctness in a given era may not always generate humanitarian sensibilities nor will literary critics' practice of political correctness in criticism or teaching necessarily lead to the kind of interactive change in which students and teachers are both in some way transformed.' (SAM)

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BLACKNESS, CRITICS, & *ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

The concluding chapter of Tom Quirk's new book, *Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn,* published earlier this month by the University of Missouri Press, raises the deliberately provocative question, "Is *Huckleberry Finn* Politically Correct?" His purpose is to challenge various readings of that book which seek, in his view, to domesticate the novel, to "sivilize" it in a manner that would make Huck Finn himself "light out for the territory." He explicitly challenges the central thesis of Shelley Fisher Fishkin's *Was Huck Black?,* and he also challenges the claim that *Huckleberry Finn* is an anti-racist novel--a central claim of my own work on this novel. Not surprisingly, Professor Quirk's answer to his own rhetorical question is, in effect, "no." On the contrary, he insists, "we prize *Huck* for its incorrectness; it is an incorruptibly incorrect book in nearly every particular" (148). Furthermore, he suggests, *Huckleberry Finn* refuses ideology.

Personally, I do not believe that any cultural artifact is ideologically neutral. This, however, is not the point that I wish to argue in this presentation. I also do not want to make this an argument against Tom Quirk's subtle, perceptive, and illuminating book. Rather, I focus on his book because it identifies so acutely some of the fundamental issues regarding how racial attitudes and ideological agendas shape our readings of this great novel. By extension, this pertains equally to our teaching of the novel. Professor Quirk's reference to "political correctness" is a self-consciously

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rhetorical gesture, intended to invoke the larger debate within our culture about the acceptable forms and limits of public discourse. Professor Quirk, however, is a serious scholar, not an ideological warrior, and he clearly recognizes that the deeper issue is how our predispositions determine our interpretations. He is not attempting to impose some rigid notion of right and wrong predispositions.

Let me say from the outset that I agree with Professor Quirk on several basic points. Above all, I share his belief that we should not allow our interest in specific aspects of the work, such as its treatment of racial issues, to blind us to other important elements in the work. He chides Professor Fishkin, for instance, for concentrating on Huck's language to the neglect of Huck's "adventures." This I regard to be a constructive and not unfriendly criticism. Similarly, he suggests that our concern with the social realities addressed by the book should not blind us to its fundamental character as an imaginative work. This is a simple, seemingly obvious point, but it is one that is too often forgotten. Finally, I agree with him that the actual racial attitudes of Samuel Langhorne Clemens should not be at issue when we interpret the novel. As he puts it: "the imaginative self who created *Huckleberry Finn* ought not be confused with the ordinary self who, on the one hand, wrote abundant racist remarks in letters to his mother, or, on the other, paid a black man's tuition to Yale" (158). In other words, an artist might imagine possibilities in his works that transcend the limitations of his day-to-day life. We as teachers should never forget this fundamental distinction between the artist and his art. I will return to these points later.

Nonetheless, despite the reasonableness of his arguments, I believe that there are many points on which equally reasonable critics may disagree

with Professor Quirk. I am not persuaded, for example, that "incorrectness" is what makes this novel worthy of celebration, though I do appreciate the cogency and force of this view. Certainly it is accurate to say that Huck's honesty, nonconformity, and forthrightness are powerfully appealing and that his comments cut to the heart of our society precisely because his freedom from social proprieties and constraints--his innocence, in other words--allows him to perceive and to speak without distortion. On the other hand, one might argue that wisdom, which represents social experience and understanding, is at least as admirable as innocence. The question, then, is how we arrive at such judgments. In order to explore this issue, I want to consider my own writing about this novel. I would like to discuss some of my own unstated concerns and assumptions, which informed my particular reading of *Huckleberry Finn*.

In 1984 I published an essay called "Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse." It was my contribution to a special issue of *The Mark Twain Journal* that observed the centennary of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with a selection of new essays by black critics. The essays present a spectrum of views ranging from John Wallace's argument that *Huckleberry Finn* "is the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written" (16) at one extreme to my own assertion that "except for Melville's work, *Huckleberry Finn* is without peer among major Euro-American novels for its explicitly antiracist stance" (104). Most of the other essays avoid both extremes and temper their appreciation for the novel's virtues with some degree of uneasiness regarding Twain's handling of racial issues. I want to focus on my own essay not because it is mine and not just because it is the one that I understand best but especially because I want to respond to a pair of

criticisms that I find cogent and troubling. Tom Quirk asserts his concern with "protecting Twain from the charge of being a sensitive guy," (158), and Wayne Booth, citing Charles H. Nichols and me, complains in his splendid book The Company We Keep that "most critics have talked as if it would be absurd to raise questions about the *racial* values of a book in which the very moral center is a noble black man so magnanimous that he gives himself back into slavery in order to help a doctor save a white boy's life" (464). The common thread in these two criticisms is the sense that interpreting *Huck Finn* as antiracist is reductive and ignores countervailing tendencies in the text. For Quirk this implies making Twain into a 1990s politically correct liberal, which he was not; and for Booth it represents the even worse sin of dismissing the moral complexities of the novel in favor of self-satisfied rationalizing.

Needless to say, I do not accept either characterization of my position. On the contrary, I share some of the basic concerns that I believe motivate both of these critics. Nevertheless, we do have some fundamental differences of perspective, and it is these that I want to address. I believe that difference is illuminating with regard to the practice of criticism and of teaching as well.

My essay characterizes the novel's treatment of race as follows:

> Twain adopts a strategy of subversion in his attack on race. That is, he focuses on a number of commonplaces associated with 'the Negro' and then systematically dramatizes their inadequacy. He uses the term 'nigger,' and he shows Jim engaging in superstitious behavior. Yet he portrays Jim as a compassionate, shrewd, thoughtful, self-sacrificing, and even wise man. . . . Jim is cautions, he gives excellent

> advice, he suffers persistent anguish over separation from his wife and children, and he even sacrifices his own sleep so that Huck may rest. Jim, in short, exhibits all the qualities that 'the Negro' supposedly lacks (105).

Obviously, this passage can be read as portraying Twain to be an earnest, left-leaning social crusader. As Tom Quirk might argue, if he were not so polite, though my discussion sometimes mentions Twain's humor, most of the irreverence and sheer fun of the book is lost in my account. On the other hand, my insistence on Twain's antiracist designs in effect dismisses the racial considerations (stereotypes, demeaning language and jokes, etc.) that lead so many racially sensitive readers of this text to feel offended or at least unsettled. This, I think, is Booth's basic objection.

Even when I was writing my essay, I was quite conscious of these problems with my argument. I decided, for a variety of reasons, that presenting an aggressively antiracist reading of this text, and a reading that credited Twain with antiracist designs, would be the most valuable contribution that I, personally, could make to the special issue and to Twain criticism. I knew that many critics over the years had addressed the book in terms of what they found racially offensive in it, and I assumed that critics would continue to stress those points. When I read the book, however, and compared it to other pieces of nineteenth century American writing, especially around the turn of the century, I saw a text that differed in significant ways from other works that addressed racial issues. It seemed important to me to call attention to these differences, especially because I had just been reading Joel Williamson's profound and troubling book *The*

Crucible of Race, which argued that the post-Reconstruction era was so violently racist and intolerant that he could not identify more than half a dozen liberal voices among the vast multitude of Southerners who wrote or spoke publicly about race during those grim years.

Though I accepted the substantial truth of Williamson's argument, which was consistent with what I had found in my own research into the period, I thought that his pessimism went too far and became, in effect, defeatist. Thus, I was inclined to look for exceptions. I wanted to show that even in the worst of times, the capitulation to racism has never been total in this country. Good motives, however, do not justify dishonest or inaccurate interpretations, and the challenge for me was to read the textual evidence in ways that even critics who did not share my premises would find persuasive. With this in mind, I decided to reconsider some of the scenes that had most frequently been discussed by critics in terms of their racial implications. Many critics have complained, for instance, that Twain portrays Jim as a comically superstitious darky.

Here is part of what I said about Tom Sawyer's first prank against Jim, which occurs in chapter 2:

> When Jim falls asleep under a tree, Tom hangs Jim's hat on a branch. Subsequently Jim concocts an elaborate tale about having been hexed and ridden by witches. The tale grows more grandiose with each repetition, and eventually Jim becomes a local celebrity, sporting a five-cent piece on a string around his neck as a talisman. 'Niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any nigger in that country,' the narrator reports. Jim's

> celebrity finally reaches the point that 'Jim was most ruined, for a servant, because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches.' That is, no doubt, amusing. Yet whether Jim believes his own tale or not--and the 'superstitious Negro' thesis requires us to assume that he does--the fact remains that Jim clearly benefits from becoming more a celebrity and less a 'servant.' . . . By constructing a fictitious narrative of his own experience, Jim elevates himself above his prescribed station in life. By becoming, in effect, and author, Jim writes himself a new destiny. (108-9)

Obviously, one may read this scene and laugh at Jim and the other slaves for being superstitious and gullible. The point of my interpretation is not to dismiss the possibility of such laughter but rather to challenge our habit of seeing stereotypes and nothing more. My argument is intended to enable a different way of understanding the scene, and it is based on a more careful consideration of the textual details. A stereotypical reading, by contrast, notes only the most superficial details. For me, the scene actually becomes *more* funny when read my way, because in addition to the minstrel show foolishness, my reading sees Jim enjoying a self-serving joke at the expense of his master and being one up on Tom Sawyer. This view allows for a more complex response to this scene, and it also complicates our understanding of the last section of the novel, where Jim again rises above Tom's cruel pranks.

I won't continue to stand here and shamelessly rehash my own work. My point is simply that I reject the implication that my or Professor

Fishkin's kind of argument makes Mark Twain into a "sensitive guy." On the contrary, I believe that to find new ways of reading the details of texts and of understanding the historical and cultural derivations of texts is a fundamental and very traditional responsibility of literary critics. To convey such understandings and to cultivate in students a passion to become informed, sophisticated readers is a definitive quality of good teachers. Political correctness, as I understand the term, suggests a kind of oppurtunist conformity: adopting certain language and attitudes in order to avoid offending anyone and to fit in with the prevailing fashions. By that standard, I do not see how readings that challenge the standard interpretations of this childhood favorite and cultural icon can be called "politically correct." On the contrary, my interpretation of Twain, and Professor Fishkin's as well, is that he was *not* politically correct. The political correctness of his era was, after all, strident racism.

Virtually all literary scholars are teachers by profession. In an important sense, criticism is also teaching. When we write we hope in some sense to instruct our readers and to inform their understandings of texts. But how much power do we actually have to influence the thinking of other people? Certainly scholarship can be pertinent and effective--sometimes--at the level of factual information: the level of historical and cultural data, of biography, of textual study. Even here, however, questions remain regarding how external facts actually bear upon specific literary texts. Professor Fishkin's book, for example, is full of original scholarship. It is factual. Nonetheless, it is largely a circumstantial argument, and critics may disagree regarding how or whether to interpret *Huckleberry Finn* in light of these

facts. Such differences limit the critic's ability to be an effective teacher of critics. This is the simpler of two interlocking problems.

The more complex problem concerns nonfactual predispositions--attitudes, values, feelings, a range of perspectival considerations that I will call "sensibility." This, I think, is the level of Wayne Booth's concerns when he hesitates at readings that *sound* right rationally but done *feel* right. Sensibility imposes limits upon rationality. This is one of the most vexing and persistent problems that critics and teachers face. It is, indeed, the fundamental problem of all pedagogy and of educational theory from Socrates to multiculturalism. If we do not disparage nonconformity as error, how can we find consensus when sensibilities clash? Wayne Booth does not pretend to answer this question in *The Company We Keep*. Instead, he emphasizes the way in which such disagreements have constantly revitalized his own thinking and by extension sustain intellectual ferment within the community of literary studies.

Personally, I want more than the stimulation of good intellectual company. Though I respect differences of sensibility, I believe that criticism and teaching can change, not just how people think, but how they feel. To me, this is what education means: a constant process of interactive change, in which student and teacher are both in some way transformed. Thus, I do not consider sensibility sacrosanct. Like ideas, feelings can be challenged and changed. My criticism is intended to make readers *feel* the racial issues of *Huckleberry Finn* in a different way. It is no wonder that Booth chose a debate about teaching this book at The University of Chicago as the frame for *The Company We Keep*. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a floating symposium, a contentious episode in one boy's education. As critics and

teachers, we should strive to illuminate the voices that contribute to Huck's adventure.